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Reading and text analysis in teaching of professional German

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Abstract

The paper deals with reading in teaching of professional German at one of the universities in the Czech Republic. The author - she is a tutor of this subject - propagates modern teaching methods, especially the use of e-learning in foreign language teaching. But in this article she speaks about the ways in which reading as a classical method of teaching, supplemented by some distinctive components might come into its own also in blended learning process. The techniques of its didactical use are put in concrete terms, the reader is alerted to some mistakes, their heart is explained. Where necessary, the author is touching the principles of choice of suitable texts which can be used in lesson.

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1. Introduction

My place of work is the Faculty of Informatics and Management at the University Hradec Králové in the Czech Republic. Here I teach Czech students of several study branches professional German in economics. I use actual methods, but I alternate them with some well-tried and time-tested ones. Reading is one of such methods.

If we study the evolution of foreign language methods, we cannot help thinking that reading as a teaching method has steadily been moved aside by new perhaps more efficient methods. It is certainly true, if we have in mind reading as a method of an old kind. I leave its basis unchanged, but I supplement it by some modern aspects. I want to outline it as a useful way of professional foreign language teaching nowadays.

We live in a world full of social economic aspects. They have been explained in many texts of popular or professional nature. But we usually are interested by such ones only; in which we can expect some new information useful for us. And this shows a very important didactical conclusion: To use such texts in teaching which might make an impression on students. I never presume that the text I put into my tuition is a novelty to its readers, to my students. Their life experience, some tuition in lectures and seminary exercises in their mother tongue go before their knowledge about any theme. Their up to now knowledge of a foreign language acts as a mediator of general perception of new information. And I concentrate during my tuition just on this perception. Here starts a real didactical process with two practical variants just in its introduction: I offer my students the possibility of acquaint with the text at home before the lesson (1), or I allow them acquaint with the text not until at the beginning of the lesson (2).

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The extracts and examples accompanying my explanations are taken from the chapter 6 of the book written by Willy Herman, Iso Tuor, Bernhard Wenger and called *Geld und Wirtschaft*. (The 7.ed. 1989, ed. by Schweizerische Volksbank).

2. Work with Text

2.1. *Work with known text*

Even the situation where a student reads the text in my absence should lead to the first constituent part of the teaching purpose. It should lead him to a special language analysis of the text from the point of view of importance of its parts, paragraphs or even sentences. Therefore, I connect the possibility of his previous familiarization with the text with a task. And even by this first task I invite my students to pay their attention to the content and to linguistic aspects of the text. That is why I always make pairs of questions, one relevant to content, another one to language. For example:

1. a) *In what way does Switzerland balance the payment of its trade deficit?*
 b) *What do the expressions *die Sweiz*, *die Schweizer* mean?*
2. a) *For what year are valid the data mentioned in the text?*
 b) *Which gender is the word “saldo” and how does read its plural?*

It is suitable to print such questions behind the text and it is necessary to formulate them in the foreign language in the easiest way. By distributing the text it is possible to remind students of important links, for example that the text's extract is taken from the book edited by the National Bank of Switzerland. In this way it may be used the association with the idea Switzerland = the land of economic prosperity.

The mentioned tasks lead the student in two directions: The first is a linguistic one. It gives rise to the effort to understand the contents of the text on the basis of the up to now language knowledge or the necessity of using a good dictionary in some cases. My experience shows, however, that the more difficult is the second part of the given task: To separate the specific piece of information from a given text.

In my tutorial I sometimes give the students a text with a title, sometimes without it. Both of the two possibilities have their didactical consequences: A well chosen title usually agrees well with the author's intent of his text, it arouses some curiosity and stimulates a student-reader. I connect the given text in this case with a task heading for quite a different intent than the one expressed by the title. A disadvantage usually is that the intent of the text expressed by its title shades to the student some components of the text, sometimes even its structure. At the beginning I rather choose the texts without titles. However, I consequently follow the didactical side of my choice and as an introductory text I distribute an extract not difficult for its composition. Such an extract, for example, may have its distinctly separated content parts, these parts may be numbered, provided with their subheadings, are not too long, represent well understandable content wholes etc.

The task in both mentioned cases is a component of so-called selective reading. The task itself doesn't need, of course, to correspond to the author's intent, who, for example wants to emphasize some parts of the text or separate words only by different types of print, by spaced printing etc.

The difficulty of the answers to given questions should be adjusted in such a way that for a sufficient solution would not be enough one and only quick and idle reading. However, it is suitable to formulate the task always in the way that a student would find sufficient vocabulary for formulation of his own answers in the given text extract already, so as he would not need to use a dictionary.

I occasionally choose a text supplemented by a graph or diagram. Both these addenda always belong organically to the text. They sometimes accentuate a certain content element or mean the summary of content that means a piece of information one is able to comprehend at first sight at once. I formulate my question to the text in such a way that a student might obtain his answer just looking at the given text supplement. I know that this task is a more difficult variation of the first task and I give it to the students later, after they had gained some experience in text analysis.

I don't think it is suitable to distribute a text to students without any specific question or other form of a task with a general instruction to read the text as a part of their homework before the next lesson. The text distributed to

students like this does not support the fulfillment of my didactic goal. This form of distribution leads to a fixed idea that the text is important in any rate and all its content elements at the same time, otherwise it would be not used in teaching process. Just the separate content elements seem to be equally important to students, they do not realize their differentiated meanings, they do not even try to reveal them.

The aforementioned progress has also its psychological significance: A student is standing before a simple task adequate to his language possibilities and not demanding too much of his time. He therefore concentrates on his carrying it out. With remaining things he will wait till the contact with his teacher at the lesson.

If I choose this process I usually start my lesson by checking the accuracy of answers. I am more concerned with the accuracy of language. Of course, I can assume that any students did not work without a foreign help. I can ask for answers in writing and invite some students to try to formulate their answers verbally. I take into account how much the respondents follow the close literal wording of the text. I usually accompany the separate performances by a feedback; by a positive remark or a short encouraging criticism. I analyse incorrect answers very shortly, in a few words only. Wherever it is possible I use the vocabulary of the text during this process, I read myself or invite to read the parts of some sentences or the wholes of them. I have in view the pronunciation of used words and the sentence stress. I conclude this part of the teaching process reading the whole text myself. I pay attention to compound words. Some compound nouns are very long, formed by three or four formants, containing of many syllables. I accentuate tonic stress and natural pauses of discourse. If I decided to use text without its title, suitable exercise usually is to try formulating it and to compare it with the original author's title.

2.2. *Work with unknown text*

On another occasion, when the students did not work with the text within the time of their home work, I distribute the text sheets at the beginning of a lesson, invite the students to silent reading of the text, this time without any concrete task. I do not proceed to separate words even after this silent reading. Meanwhile I work with these respondents who volunteer. I compare some answers of theirs with the text. I evaluate the answers and I add my own reading of some text segments. I do not translate the text, do not ask the students to translate it. To understand it, they use their own language knowledge hitherto. Of course, from this very beginning they cut their teeth on the fact, that it will always be their interest to work with the text before of the lesson whenever the situation and occasion will allow it.

On the next programme, I put scanning, a sort of silent reading. I invite students to search for a single piece, usually for a closely delimited one, of information. I try to assign a task which would be not too complicated, but not too primitive at the same time. For example:

- 1.a) There is one important international economic term in the author's text. Find this word, pay attention to its use. (Note: It is the term Bilanz, always used as a formant of compound noun.)
- 1.b) When was the whole payment balance published in Switzerland for the first time?
- 2.a) The text uses the international term Deficit. What is the German autonym?
- 2.b) How high was the capital export of Switzerland in 1986?

I try to find such a sort of tasks so that I could continue my next progress. In this case I can continue for example with a task: Put down all the compound nouns in which the word Bilanz is the basic semantic component of a term. (The basic semantic components always stand as the last part of compound word. The proceeding formant itself can be a simple word or a compound word, but it always has its defining application only: in this concrete case it says what kind of balance it concerns in the text.) I point out that another type of a compound word can be found, when a word is an adjective. There are for example *zweiseitig*, *vollständig*, *augenfällig*, *kurzfristig*, *langfristig*, *rückläufig*, *weltweit*, *aussergewöhnlich* etc. in the text.

After this explanation of mine I give another task: Put down compound adverbs. (There are many in the text: *gleichzeitig*, *geringfügig*, *betragsmässig*, *regelmässig*, *volkswirtschaftlich*, *teilweise*, *üblicherweise*, *vielfach*, *erstmal*, *inwieweit*, *genauso*, *beispielhaft* etc.) I of course remind that not every compound noun in the text is automatically a term. Then I complete my explanation with a simple task: The author speaks about a Zahlungsbilanz

and a Teilbilanz. Find the relevant place in the text and decide on the base of the context which of the two compound words is a term and why it is so. It may be clear to the students, but too difficult to explain it in German. Therefore they are allowed to use their mother tongue. I assign a similar task: Decide the same about other words, for example Transaktion, Währung etc. Another task is to excerpt the terms of international kind, for example Debet, Kreditabilität. Liquidität etc. I have mentioned these activities in very concrete terms quite on purpose and I go into particulars as to be evident that the teacher's activities follow the students' activities. In my experience such change of activities is very important.

My next task necessitates search reading. I ask my students to find some connections or more of content elements of the text. My task bases on the key term Bilanz again: I invite the students to show the words in which the author isolates the term Leistungsbilanz, to find out the relevant paragraph and to gloss the author's explanation of the term Ertragsbilanz.

Another practice of reading is so called skimming. Its purpose is to find the answers to several questions connected with each other or to clarify several aspects of the basic fact. For example: Find out and put down the symptoms and concomitant circumstances of the oil crisis after the year 1972. I sometimes proceed also the other way round, and I mention 3-4 facts as concomitant circumstances of the oil crises and I invite students to specify the item mentioned by the author. This practice of the work is known as multiple-choice.

Receptive reading is suitable if the students have to answer some more difficult questions. They can be applicable to summarize the content of a text as a whole, or on the contrary to delimitate the essence of one content element only. In this case I want the students to be very accurate; they are allowed to quote the author's text or to gloss it using his formulation.

I sometimes check even the tasks of the following type: Students are invited to name the symptoms of the oil crisis touching some states in South America. A student who had read the text attentively enough should not be afraid to give a negative answer in the sense that the author admittedly mentions South America, but he does not name any state in concrete. Such tasks prevent to form a stereotype in students' minds that every question connected with a text can and must be answered by finding a place in a text which makes possible to give a positive answer.

I close the inventory of reading processes with so called responsive reading. It is about text interpretation in its results. I work with the whole text again. The students know some places of it already, connections and links of its content, the importance of some content segments or elements, their sequence, the author's standpoint to some mentioned fact etc. When preparing his interpretation, a student works with the text in scope of his language knowledge.

Choosing my text I want at least some of them to contain the phenomena I must teach on the basis of contrastive grammar of Czech and German. Such phenomena are for example: Prepositional phrases, in which German has some preposition not typical in Czech, such as: durch ein Beispiel zeigen, unter Beweis stellen, zur Debatte stehen, zur Diskussion kommen, vom Interesse sein, ins Gewicht fallen, zum Ausdruck kommen; there are of course many others. I pay my attention to the usage of modal verbs for expressing of an uncertain, supposed, possible action only. I occasionally work with participles, with the usage of passive voice by expressing of sentence subject.

I often proceed rather mechanically at first, with a task like this one: Find out the longest sentence of the text. Try to determine the content and function of this sentence in the text. Mind the conjunction. Other task: Find out the sentence in which the author gives his reason for a content element. Mind the conjunction and try to decide if it is usual in such a sentence type; determine the subordinate clause. How can you distinguish the main and the subordinate clauses if not taking into account the conjunction? Find some contexts where the author expresses a state as a cause of the action that follows; a state as a cause of another state, an action as a cause of another action.

I of course must familiarize well with the chosen text myself. It is important to know what exactly offers a text for its analysis, which segments of it are most suitable from this point of view. In the text I have mentioned here many times already, such concrete language phenomena are for example: often conditional sentences beginning with a clause without a conditional conjunction; the usage of words so, da, was, demzufolge in their conjunctive functions; the usage of questions in an explanative text; usage of impersonal passive voice, phrases with verbs in infinitive with zu (Die Exporttätigkeit erlaubt uns mehr zu produzieren; and so on.). Frequency of not commonly used prepositions or prepositional phrases (innerhalb, während, gemäß, bezüglich, gegenüber, im Gefolge, abhängig

von; and so on.) my attention pays also to specific German usage of a double part of a sentence. For example: Devisenein- und -ausgänge; die Dienstleistung- und Kapitalertragsbilanz; die schweizerischen Währungsreserven zu- oder abgenommen haben; and so on.

I want also to quote some tasks aiming into composition of text: Try to find out the language means by that the author manages the coherence of text content elements. Does in its formulation play any role the article of substantive? If so, find the context as an example of it and explain it in details.

Very substantial are some of following ways of work with a text in this connection. For example you can print two short separate paragraphs behind a text and invite students to incorporate them into suitable places of a text and to give reasons for such incorporation. Another task: You can print two or three paragraphs in a disordered way and invite students to put them in the right order. I choose such paragraphs that show their right order by suitable language means, first of all by some adverbs, or some phrases (in erster Linie, in erster Reihe, etc.)

Underlining separate words, phrases or clauses while reading is a useful visual aid. However, I allow my students to underline only those words that are mentioned by the analysis of the text. Then it is clear that even a very good professional text contains places, words and sentences which only function is to be an element of a good style. Students learn to know that from no professional text we take everything that it contains in detail. We always get down to a professional text with a certain expectation and in harmony with this expectation we appreciate its contents. The students learn to know that any arrangement of content elements is liable to certain rules and that it is necessary to familiarize with these rules before they start any work with the text.

3. Conclusion

The extent of a text and limited time being at teacher's disposal do not allow to use all mentioned types of reading in the same text. Some must be left out. In this case I never leave out the same type of reading. I fix all attention on the content of a text, I teach orthography of new words in other lessons. I whole – heartedly use all possibilities given by all kinds of reading.

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